DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 240 898 HE 016 955

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TITLE A Comprehensive Model for Assuring Quality in Off-Campus Programming.
PUB DATE [83]
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Armed Forces; *College Programs; Educational Planning; *Educational Quality; *Extension Education; Higher Education; *Improvement Programs; Military Personnel; Needs Assessment; *Off Campus Facilities; Program Evaluation; Public Relations; School Community Relationship
IDENTIFIERS GI Bill

ABSTRACT

A model for evaluating the higher education programs offered at Army bases is described. Attention is focused not only on what off-campus staff can do to develop and maintain quality, but what can be done to demonstrate to outsiders the achievement of quality. It is suggested that the institution needs to have genuine concern for quality, a commitment to change, and a high level of action directed to improvement. The process of insuring quality involves educational program needs assessment, strategic planning, continuous program review, personnel training, and an education community plan. The improvement activity must be organized and systematic and based on reliable information. Additional elements that are needed are a periodic external review process and public information programs. In addition to the establishment of mission (an intersection of community and institutional values) and the development and review of program plans, the model is based on openness to external review for public assurance and the provision of an open information flow to the general public. (SW)

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A COMPREHENSIVE MODEL FOR ASSURING QUALITY IN OFF-CAMPUS PROGRAMMING

by
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Talk about the quality of higher education programs, whether off-campus or on-campus, often comes to be a discussion of other institutions. We are reasonably sure that what we are doing meets some consensual set of standards, but we are not too certain that everybody's programs would do so.

If we look at ourselves, it is to try to determine how to convince outsiders of what we know to be our reasonably high quality. How do we demonstrate to would-be critics that we are as good as we think we are?

Both of these concerns, the doubtful quality of other programs and our need to convince others of our own quality, has led to a most common quality-assurance method. We collect data of several types designed to show that what occurs off-campus is, as nearly as we can establish, exactly the same as what occurs in the same programs on-campus. This is, for example, the basis for accreditation associations' reviews of off-campus programming. Questions are asked and standards are written which determine whether faculty recruitment policies and practices are identical, off-campus, to what occurs on-campus. Does program development and approval follow the same process? Are admission standards the same? And

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so on. The fallacy, of course, is that duplicating a weak on-campus program doesn't improve the off-campus clone.

Even recognizing this weakness, we persist because there are so few workable alternatives.

Another approach to quality is to focus on the specific, the micro view, to such an extent that we don't have to face the larger quality issues. We conduct institutional research studies which show that evaluations of off-campus faculty (by off-campus students, for instance) equal or exceed the evaluations of on-campus faculty (by on-campus students). We write about specific aspects of the administration of such programs, financing, student advisement, marketing, and so on, avoiding the larger quality concerns.

We do these things with one common justification. We argue that no one really knows what quality is anyway. So why bother? After all, we have satisfied whatever criteria the accreditation associations have imposed. Students appear reasonably satisfied; campus administrators are happy; it is only an odd critic who appears to continue to raise doubts.

Let me begin by debunking a common myth -- quality, of higher education programs, is NOT hard to define. It's so easy everybody can do it -- and has. Since everybody has created at least one definition, the process can't be all that hard. What IS difficult is getting a consensus.

The model described in this paper began with this apparent contradiction. Definition is easy; consensus is hard. The interesting thing about this is that our shifting focus from the larger view to the specific, from the macro to the micro, makes consensus even more difficult. In some sense, we are working against our own success when we do this. We know that the more we focus attention on specific details the more difficult it is to get agreement. It is only by focusing on larger dimensions that we have any reasonable hope of getting people to concur. This is where the model begins.

History

The model was developed as a part of a project undertaken for the Education Directorate of the Army's Forces Command. This is a headquarters command having responsibility for about 20 bases which house combat-ready troops; it covers a geographic area from Maine to California and from Alaska to Panama.

The original aim was to develop a method for evaluating the higher education programs offered on these bases. The intent was to provide an on-going way for the Army to respond to the several critics of such programs, and, also, for the Army to be able to assure itself that the colleges and universities offering such programs were, in fact, providing quality.

This original goal was modified rather quickly for several reasons. Among the more compelling was the fact that there was no clear mission for these programs. The providing of such programs predated the move to the all-volunteer force, for example. So, people were aware that some of the original reasons no longer applied, but they weren't sure what the justification might be under the new structure. We need to remind oursevles from time to time that the heart of the word evaluation is the word value. And its difficult to evaluate without having or knowing the intended value.

Another reason was found in the multiple reactions which the term EVALUATION produced. Institutions saw the spectre of new overseers and new costs; accreditation associations saw new threats to their historical purposes; and so on. These three, the military, the institutions and the accreditation bodies have been preoccupied with sorting out their shared responsibility for assessing program quality.

The Model

The resultant model, then, first sorts out a difference between QUALITY ENSURANCE and QUALITY ASSURANCE.

Ensurance is, simply, what people connected with such off-campus programs can reasonably do to develop and maintain the highest quality

which can be achieved within the limitations of the resources available.

Assurance is, then, what can be done, subsequently, to demonstrate to outsiders what dimensions of quality have been achieved.

The model has, then, two major subsystems, ensurance and assurance.

The development of the elements within each of these two major subsystems came from an analysis of the points at which there appeared to be some quality consensus.

There have been, previously, two common approaches to the definition of quality in higher education programs.

There have been input definitions. These have included such factors as the number and character of the advanced degrees held by faculty members, the number of volumes in the library, the level and source of the financial support, the standardized test scores of admitted students, etc. These definitions have argued, essentially, that if what goes into the higher education mix is good, the program is one of quality. There have been two subtypes of input definitions -- concentration on more measurable, more quantifiable, dimensions such as books, scores and degrees; and concentration on the more intangible dimensions such as the collegiality of decision processes, and the extent of the freedom to teach and to learn. But both were interested in inputs.

And there have been output definitions. These have given attention to indices of quality found in the products of the educational programs. Such definitions have focused on the number of graduates who have sought advanced degrees, the alumni members in high or prominent positions, scores of graduates on licensing examinations of various types, and employers' ratings of the on-the-job performances of graduates. Again, there have been people advocating the more quantifiable of these and those who insisted on the more intangible dimensions. But both looked primarily at the output end of the program as the proper view for demonstrating quality.

And we have written standards for programs based on such definitions. By applying values to these definitions we have written quality prescriptions. We have set standards such as how many advanced degrees the faculty SHOULD have, the number of volumes the library should have, the percentage of graduates who should pass a licensing examination on their first try, the acceptable score on an exit criterion exam, and so on.

It is on such definitions and standards that there has been no consensus.

Where it is possible to achieve some consensus is on what might be called REQUISITE CONDITIONS for quality.

These include:

1. A high level of concern for quality.

2. A high activity level focused on improvement.

3. A high level of justified confidence.

4. The concern, activity and confidence must be well-known.

There must be a genuine concern for quality which is pervasive throughout the entire institution. Such a concern for how good the programs are and how they can still be improved should be found throughout the college and its environment. It is not sufficient for but a few persons to be interested in quality, such an interest must permeate the organization. Without this concern, quality is impossible.

Such a concern must, also, be truly representative of a commitment to change. At least it should reflect a willingness to change -- a receptivity, an openness, to alter practices. Improvement requires change.

This concern must also be continuous. Not only is it essential that most everyone be involved, but they must be interested all of the time. It is not sufficient to get interested in quality only once in a while -- as an accreditation visit approaches, for example. Continuity of support for improvement is vital.

And, then, this interest and concern needs to lead to some action. If interest doesn't lead to action, no improvement occurs. This activity

level, in turn, must be organized and systematic. Haphazard approaches to improvement have little likelihood of producing quality.

This improvement activity should be differentiated according to the special interests, perspectives and abilities of the organization's people. That is, along with other differentiations of role which the college has defined, involvement in improvement should also be carefully assigned. Governing bodies should not try to produce quality by rewriting course syllabi; nor should faculty seek improvement by trying to restructure the mission of the institution. Each part of the organization has a legitimate interest and perspective and these should be respected in the activity focused on quality enhancement.

Activity improves if it is based on information rather than myth, superstition or misinformation. In short, improvement activity ought to be based on the best information which it is possible to collect or generate.

And, activity directed at quality attainment or enhancement needs to be encouraged, supported and rewarded. It cannot be persistent and pervasive if it has no tangible pay-off.

The concern and activity should lead to some institutional and individual sense of quality confidence.

It is important, finally, that the confidence be genuine and authentic, that it be based on a realistic view of what has been occurring

in the institution.

To assure others, information about the continuing concern, the improvment activity and the sense of pride need to be broadly shared. It is not sufficient to assume that if we are genuinely interested, that if we are earnestly trying to improve, that if we feel good about what we have accomplished, outsiders will automatically know and understand. We have to ogranize very deliberate programs for insuring that this information is distributed, received and understood. Call it public relations if you will, but whatever it's called it is the process by which our critical publics come to be assured of our program quality.

For QUALITY ENSURANCE, then, we need to:

1. Increase the pervasiveness of the concern for quality.

2. Increase individuals' levels of concern.

3. Provide continuity to this concern for improvement.

4. Provide an organization for improvement activity.

5. Coordinate among levels and types of interests.

6. Provide a better information base.

7. Provide people with the skills to use this information.

8. Increase individuals' confidence in program quality.

And for QUALITY ASSURANCE we need to:

9. Publicly display these improvement concerns and activities.

Two ideas need emphasis here.

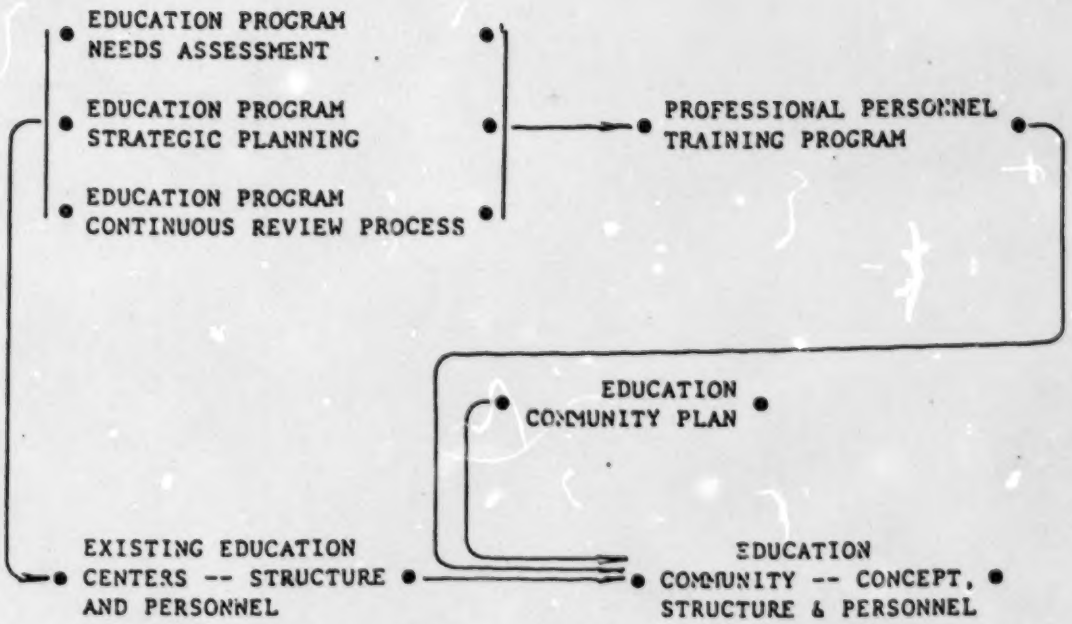
First, these items are reasonably consensual. Few would doubt that these items are quality prerequisites.

Second, these items will not necessarily insure high quality, they fit into the logical category of being neccessary but perhaps not sufficient.

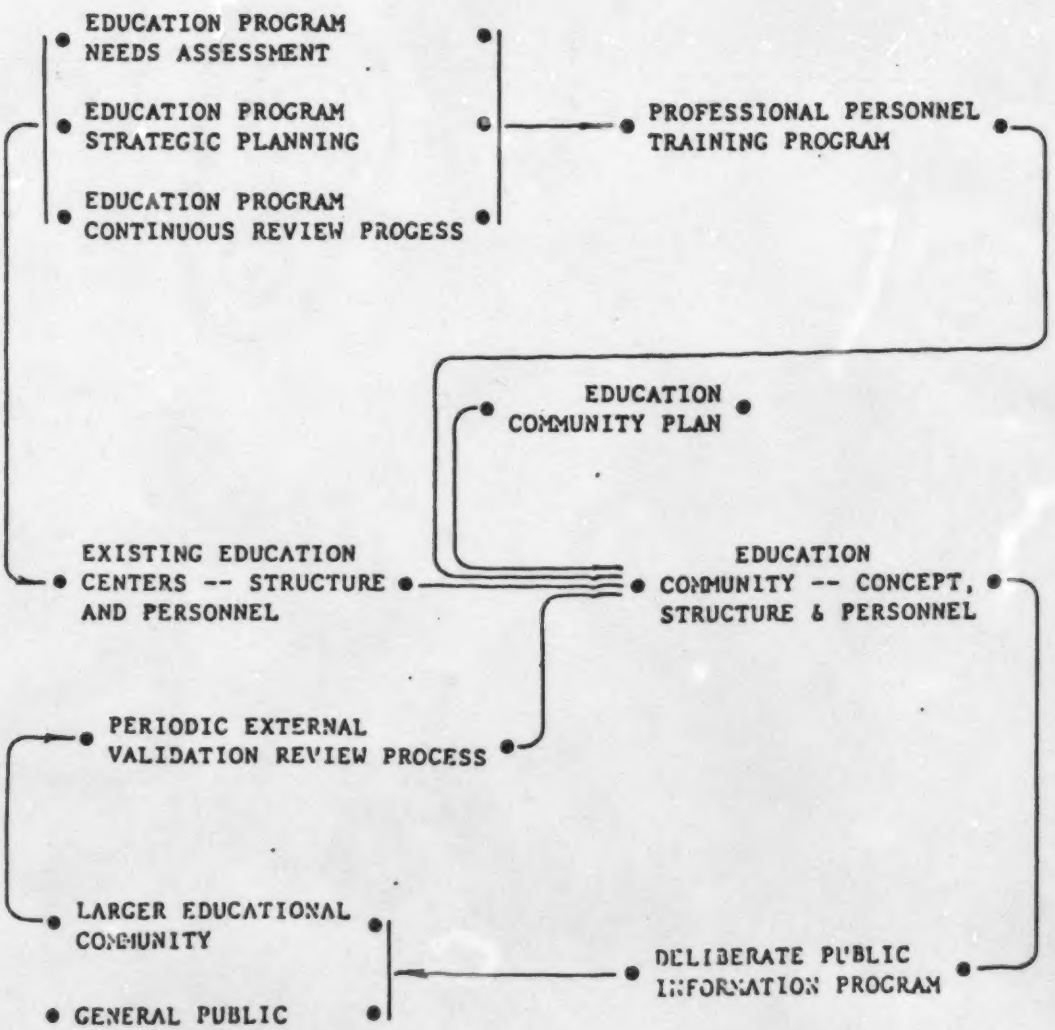
What is the case, however, is that without these elements quality cannot be achieved. And with them what will occur is improvement. We cannot say with certainty that we are good today; we can say that we're better today than we were yesterday.

From this list of quality requisites has come the elements of a comprehensive quality model. The diagrams on the next pages illustrate these and the interrelationships among them.

HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAM QUALITY ENSURANCE SYSTEM


EDUCATION PROGRAM NEEDS ASSESSMENT
EDUCATION PROGRAM STRATEGIC PLANNING
EDUCATION PROGRAM CONTINUOUS REVIEW PROCESS
PROFESSIONAL PERSONNEL TRAINING PROGRAM
EDUCATION COMMUNITY PLAN
EXISTING EDUCATION CENTERS -- STRUCTURE AND PERSONNEL
EDUCATION COMMUNITY -- CONCEPT, STRUCTURE & PERSONNEL

HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAM QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM


EDUCATION PROGRAM NEEDS ASSESSMENT
EDUCATION PROGRAM STRATEGIC PLANNING
EDUCATION PROGRAM CONTINUOUS REVIEW PROCESS
PROFESSIONAL PERSONNEL TRAINING PROGRAM
EDUCATION COMMUNITY PLAN
EXISTING EDUCATION CENTERS -- STRUCTURE AND PERSONNEL
EDUCATION COMMUNITY -- CONCEPT, STRUCTURE & PERSONNEL
PERIODIC EXTERNAL VALIDATION REVIEW PROCESS
LARGER EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY
GENERAL PUBLIC
DELIBERATE PUBLIC INFORMATION PROGRAM

The ENSURANCE subsystem has, essentially, five elements: educational needs assessment, strategic planning, a continuous program review process, personnel training and an educational community.

The ASSURANCE subsystem adds two additional elements: a periodic external review process and deliberate public information programs.

The model illustrates how the first three ensurance elements, needs assessment, strategic planning and continuous review become the content for the professional preparation of program operators, the administrators and faculty for such off-campus programs. And these three enter existing operations to help create and become the functions of an operating educational community. This community will be further illustrated by a later model diagram.

Once functioning, then, the off-campus community functions to assess needs, make plans, and review programs continuously.

Additionally, the community stands to be visited as a functioning entity periodically for public (education and general) assurance of quality. And it engages in its own public information campaigns to reinforce this public understanding of what is happening within that off-campus educational community.

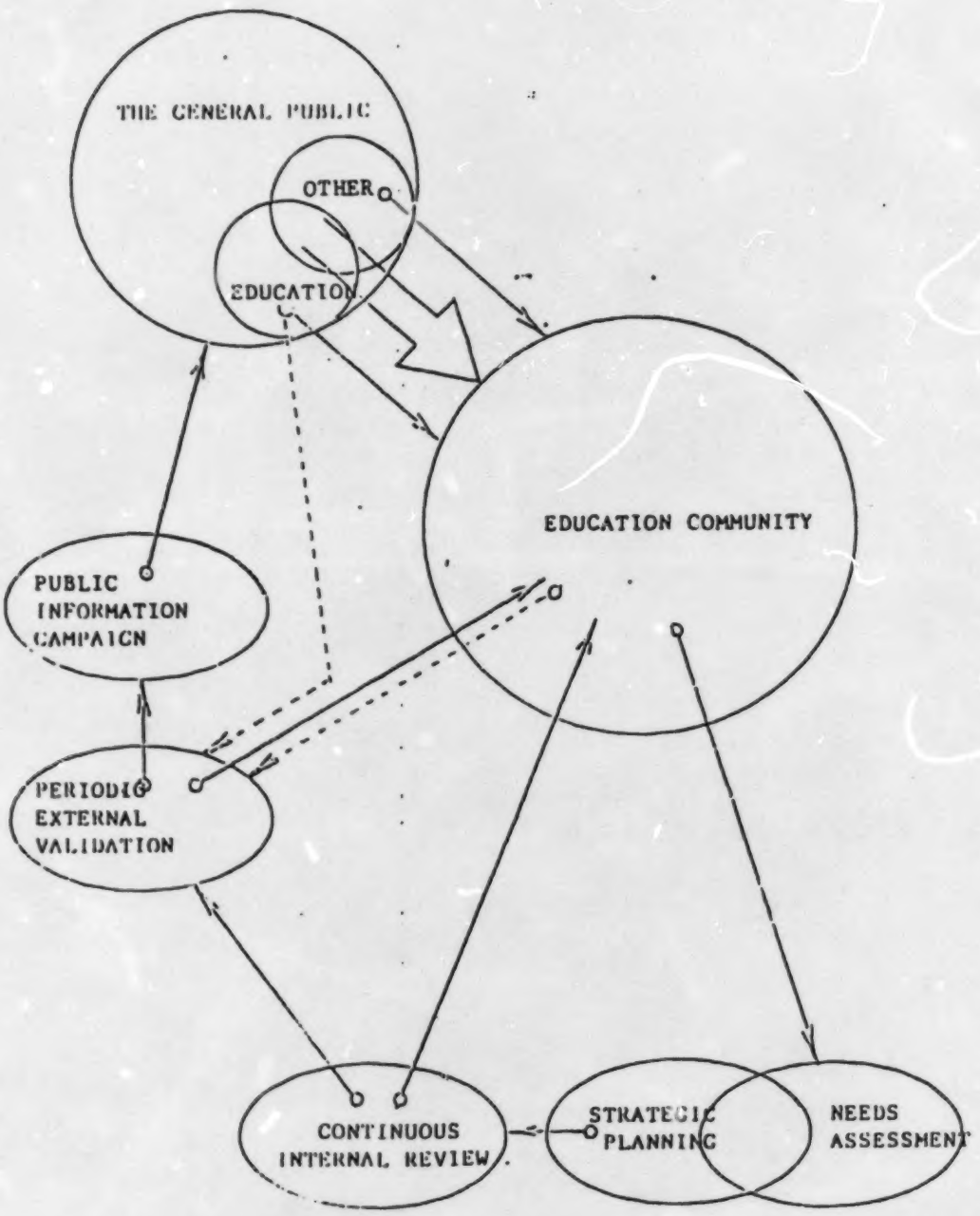
The critical, functional element is the EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY.

The final figure included in this paper better illustrates the centrality of this element and its functioning as an assessing, planning, evaluating and communicating entity.

The element and its functions are derived from conclusions drawn from and interpretations of reported quality concerns, activities and criticisms -- the fundamental quality unit in contemporary higher education appears to be a sense of community. There is an openness, a sense of sharing, which appears basic to quality. Actions, policies or structures which destroy or inhibit this community are associated with lower or reduced quality.

One of the symbols of this sense of community is the college library. When the quality of off-campus programs is discussed one of the two most often mentioned criticisms is the library and its inaccessibility to off-campus students. Yet, these criticisms come from people who often don't make assignments requiring on-campus students to enter the building. Sometimes the critics are people who only rarely enter the library themselves. (Check this for yourself. Ask your own librarian about the library useage of some of the most vocal critics of your off-campus programs.) So how can we explain this except by treating the library as a symbol rather than as an essential entity.

Another support comes from the other common criticized factor, the part-time or adjunct faculty. It's difficult to argue the appropriateness of their credentials and their experience. Yet they're about as often criticized as the library facilities. What makes these people different?


THE GENERAL PUBLIC
OTHER
EDUCATION
EDUCATION COMMUNITY
PUBLIC INFORMATION CAMPAIGN
PERIODIC EXTERNAL VALIDATION
CONTINUOUS INTERNAL REVIEW
STRATEGIC PLANNING
NEEDS ASSESSMENT

At least one factor is that they are not part of the lines of communication which are available on-campus. As with the library, it is NOT the usage which makes a difference, but, rather, the OPPORTUNITY for use which seems important.

The critical element, then, appears to be this sense of community -- this opportunity for interaction across experiences and values.

Off-campus programs will be of quality to the extent that they participate in or provide this community element. To the extent that we continue to separate off-campus programming from the mainstream of the parent community without providing an alternative, the programs will be held to be inherently inferior. This is the basic message of this third illustration.

The comprehensive quality model promised by the title of this paper, then, is the creation of the community element and its structuring and preparation for fulfilling the other functions of an educational community -- the establishment of mission (an intersection of community and institutional values called needs assessment), the generation of program plans, the continuous assessment of what is occurring and the continuous attempts at improvement, the openness to external review for public (especially the larger educational public) assurance and the provision of an open information flow to the general public. This is the quality provision of the model.